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The Netherlands

## **Blanded leorning: Three Digital Approaches to Teaching Old English**

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strange facial expressions and I was looking in the right place. Most recently, we met for coffee in London to discuss how best to balance a first full-time job with continuing to publish.

It wasn't a huge commitment in terms of time for either of us, but it really did make a lot of difference to my confidence. Having someone to ask tricky career questions that were specific to the field was particularly useful, and the fact that Jenny kept checking in periodically meant I felt like someone further on in their career cared about how I was doing. So thank you to Megan, Peter, Damian and Mary-Kate for setting this up, and I hope to act as a mentor to someone at conferences in the future.

**Kathryn Maude**  
American University of Beirut

## ISAS 2021

Congratulations to the University of Leicester and University of Nottingham, whose joint bid was recently accepted to host ISAS 2021. The conference theme is 'Borderlands'. Christina Lee headed a team of staff and students from both universities, whose hard work and dedication won over the panel. The organising committee's message to ISAS members included the following:

'Our theme is based on the geography of Anglo-Saxon England, where this region was always part of a border territory [...]. We are looking forward to five days of crossing and breaking down borders: between disciplines, between people and also between academia and the wider public.'

## 'Blended Learning'

### *Three Digital Approaches to Teaching Old English*

Ongoing digitization provides new opportunities for teaching and engaging students both inside and outside the classroom.<sup>1</sup> What follows is a brief report on three approaches to using new media to facilitate undergraduate teaching of Old English at Leiden University, the Netherlands. First, the use of video clips to explain basic features of Old English grammar and morphology is discussed. Next, we report on how the incorporation of student-created material (vlogs on the Norman Conquest and 'homemade' Old English proverbs) led to a better understanding of the course content. Finally, an analysis of a Facebook group for Old English students, which has run for a duration of over four years, is shown along with the best practices that have been gleaned from it.

#### 1. Old English Grammar Videos

While some students acquire the basics of Old English grammar after one round of explanation, others require repeated explication. This varying pace of acquisition cannot always be catered to in a traditional classroom setting. If the tutor repeats the basic grammatical information too often, valuable in-class time is lost and the more advanced students will lose interest, creating a potentially hostile atmosphere for students who need extra explanation. In other words, while teachers are recommended to tailor their didactic practice to the needs of the individual learner,<sup>2</sup> traditional teaching may not be the most suitable environment for 'differentiated learning'. Research has shown that the incorporation of digital teaching tools can be effective in this regard.<sup>3</sup>

For our introductory course in Old English, a

1 For a good introduction, see, e.g., Janet MacDonald, *Blended Learning and Online Tutoring: Planning Learner Support and Activity Design*, 2nd edn (Aldershot: Routledge, 2008).

2 Carol Ann Tomlinson, *The Differentiated Classroom: Responding to the Needs of All Learners*, 2nd edn (Alexandria, VA: ASCD, 2014).

3 See, e.g., Carla Haelermans, Joris Ghysels and Fernao Prince, 'Increasing Performance by Differentiated Teaching? Experimental Evidence of the Student Benefits of Digital Dif-

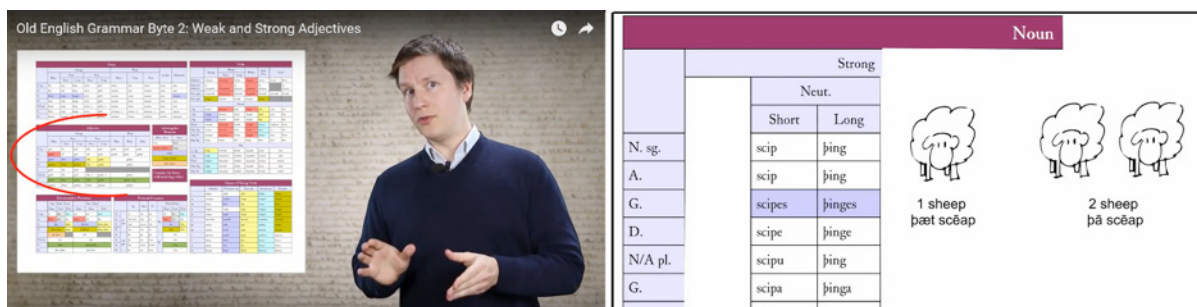


Figure 1: Stills from Old English grammar videos

number of grammar videos were developed in order to enable students to learn Old English grammar at their own pace and avoid the repetition of basic information in class. These videos could be watched in the students' own time, as often as desired, and they could be paused and rewound when necessary.<sup>4</sup> The videos were created using a green screen, showing the coordinator of the course and simple PowerPoint animations. Peter Baker's 'Magic Sheet' of Old English was used as a point of departure for each of the videos, since his *Introduction to Old English* (3rd edn, 2010) was used for the course.

One of the advantages of using videos to explain grammar is that it allows for a better and more dynamic visualization of information than a traditional classroom setting. For instance, we could zoom in on particular parts of the 'Magic Sheet' and indicate specific forms within paradigms. In addition, the 'dry' grammatical information could be presented in a light and attractive way by using visual material, including Old English memes – e.g., *swiga ond nim min mynet* perfectly illustrates the imperative mood and is a play on the popular 'shut up and take my money' meme (see Figure 2, below). Moreover, special effects, such as a booming voice shouting, 'Repeat after me: Whether adjectives are strong or weak is independent from the nouns they modify!' help to hammer the

ferentiation', *British Journal of Educational Technology* 46 (2015), 1161–1174.

4 On the efficacy of video-based-learning, see Sharon J. Derry, Miriam Gamoran Sherin and Bruce L. Sherin, 'Multimedia Learning with Video', in *The Cambridge Handbook of Multimedia Learning*, ed. by R. E. Mayer, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 785–812.

message home. This combination of words, pictures, animation and narration allows students to learn better than from words alone.<sup>5</sup> In other words, it is important to use the full visual potential of the medium, rather than merely showing text or recording a teacher in front of a whiteboard.

The videos were created two years ago and have proven their efficacy. The instructors found that they had more time during tutorials to discuss translations, literature and culture, since students no longer required in-class time to be used to repeat basic grammar. Students, too, performed better. The year-groups of students who had the advantage of the grammar videos scored better on grammar quizzes than students of previous years.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, a survey among students showed that they certainly appreciated the videos: they all thought it was an effective tool for learning Old English grammar and gave the videos a score of 9 out of 10, with some reporting that they found it easier to learn with the videos than from a

5 S. K. Reed, 'Cognitive Architectures for Multimedia Learning', *Educational Psychologist* 41 (2010), 87–98, (esp. 90–91), summarizes the most effective principles for the use of multimedia in teaching.

6 Our introductory Old English course features two grammatical quizzes with ten open questions about Old English grammar. In 2015, 108 students made the first quiz (about case, gender, pronouns, adjectives and nouns) without the advantage of the grammar videos and scored an average of 6.5 out of 10. In 2016, the exact same quiz was given to a group of 112 students who did have access to the videos, and they scored an average of 6.8 out of 10. Another quiz, covering material for which no videos were available, was also given to both student populations; this time around, the quiz scores were exactly the same, suggesting that the increase of 0.3 on average for the first quiz was, indeed, mainly due to the grammar videos.

# hælan ‘to heal’

Person  
Number  
Tense  
Mood  
Verbals

Infinitive	hælan
Inflected Infinitive	tō hælanne
Pres. part.	hælande
Past. part.	hæled
Present	
1 Sg.	hæle
2 Sg.	hælst
3 Sg.	hælf
Plural	hælað
Subj. Sg.	hæle
Subj. Pl.	hælen
Imp. Sg.	hæl
Past	
1, 3 Sg.	hælde
2 Sg.	hædest
Plural	hædon
Subj. Sg.	hælde
Subj. Pl.	hæden

## Imperative



Figure 2: Still from a grammar video showing a meme to illustrate the imperative mood

book. A recurring comment of the students was that they appreciated the fact that the videos were not only enlightening but also entertaining.<sup>7</sup> When it comes to educational videos, a best practice certainly seems to be to intersperse the grammatical material with visual humour, including hand-drawn images, memes, pop-culture references and special effects.

To date, four videos have been created: ‘Cases and Gender’, ‘Weak and Strong Nouns’, ‘Weak and Strong Adjectives’ and ‘Weak and Strong Verbs’. All videos are now publicly available on YouTube.<sup>8</sup>

### 2. Student-Created Content: The NormanVlogQuest and PitchProverb2Peer

In a more advanced, third-year Old English literature course, blended learning was used to stimulate ‘peer-learning’ (having students learn from each other), since this is known to encourage critical reflection and self-assessment.<sup>9</sup> A traditional way of

achieving peer-learning is to have students give in-class presentations. While a great opportunity to learn essential and useful skills, in-class presentations are rarely well received by fellow students and can take up a significant amount of classroom time. By having students upload their own material to a digital environment and having their peers provide feedback online, in-class time could be spent more effectively. The move to a digital format also allowed for new kinds of assignments.

For our experiment, we used the program Pitch2Peer, a review tool that allows for on-line peer feedback and review. The tool was embedded in the digital learning environment of the course (BlackBoard), which ensured that the student-created material could only be accessed by the staff and students of the course. Through Pitch2Peer, students could submit ‘pitches’ (videos, photos, posters, text) and their fellow students would then be automatically prompted to review the material of their peers. In other words, Pitch2Peer creates a digital classroom and

7 Based on an online evaluation form, filled in by 23 students; full results available upon request.

8 For an overview, see: <https://dutchanglosaxonist.com/2017/07/31/old-english-grammar-videos/>

9 For an introduction to peer learning, see Nancy Falchikov, *Learning Together: Peer Tutoring in Higher*

*Education* (London: Routledge, 2005).

facilitates peer feedback.<sup>10</sup>

Our first Pitch2Peer assignment, the Norman VlogQuest, required students to create a vlog of five minutes covering one aspect of the Norman Conquest. They worked in groups of three to four students and could choose a topic from a set list that included, among others, ‘William the Conqueror’, ‘Bishop Stigand’, ‘The Bayeux Tapestry’, ‘The Harrying of the North’, and so on. Taken together, the vlogs would cover all relevant aspects of the Norman Conquest and its aftermath. The students were given free rein when it came to the format of the vlogs and, as a result, the vlogs ranged from PowerPoint slides with a voice-over to animations, songs and short dramatizations.<sup>11</sup> In the vlogs, they had to

across their arguments. As such, the assignment certainly stimulated the students’ creativity and gave them a chance to work together and practice new skills, such as animation and digital video editing, which may prove useful in an ever-digitizing job market.<sup>12</sup> Via Pitch2Peer, students next reviewed each other’s work and, in watching various vlogs, learned more about the events of 1066. It also gave them valuable experience in peer reviewing other students’ work from a content-based perspective.

The second assignment of this kind that we developed was ‘PitchProverb2Peer’. Following a class on Old English proverbs that involved translating *The Durham Proverbs*, the students were asked to compose their



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Sēltre byþ þæt man ānne fugel  
in hande hafað þonne tīen in  
þære lyfte

Ne dō þū eall þīn ægru on  
ānne windel.

Betera bār in mīn bedde  
þonne tord on mīn setle

Glossary  
Sēltre = better (adj.)  
Lyft = air, sky (n.)

Glossary  
dōn on = put in (v.)  
ægru = eggs (n.)

Glossary  
betera = better (adv.)  
bār = boar (n.)  
þonne = here: than (adv.)  
tord = piece of excrement, dung, filth (n.)

Figure 3: Three proverb-pitches produced by third-year undergraduate students

refer to at least three secondary sources and one primary, medieval source.

On the whole, students seemed more comfortable with the vlog format than an in-class presentation. What’s more, the multimodal format of making a video assignment allowed the students to experiment with a new array of techniques and skills to bring

own proverbs and pitch these to each other as little translation exercises. These ‘proverb-pitches’ were in the format of posters, consisting of a manuscript image from *The British Library Digital Catalogue of Illuminated Manuscripts*, an Old English proverb and a glossary. Three such ‘proverb-pitches’ are

<sup>10</sup> For more information, see: [www.pitch2peer.com/](http://www.pitch2peer.com/)

<sup>11</sup> One group of students uploaded their vlog to YouTube; it can be found by searching for ‘Keeping up with the Godwinsons’ - theirs was a spoof of the reality TV show *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*.

<sup>12</sup> For an evaluation of using digital videos as an assessment in higher education, see Blaine E. Smith, Carita Kiili and Merja Kauppinen, ‘Transmediating Argumentation: Students Composing Across Written Essays and Digital Videos in Higher Education’, *Computers & Education* 102 (2016), 138-151.

reproduced below (Figure 3).

By composing their own Old English proverbs, using the *Thesaurus of Old English*, students were actively coming to terms with Old English grammar, rather than passively deciphering it from classroom editions. Naturally, not every proverb was completely flawless and students were keen to correct their fellow students via the review prompts in Pitch2Peer. For instance, the student that came up with the proverb *Betera bār in mīn bedde þonne tord on mīn setle* was duly told that *mīn* should have been inflected for the dative case: *mīnum*. The students were graded for both the proverb-pitches and the

the tendency of overestimating the students' digital skills – as it turned out, their digital proficiency varied quite a bit and, in the end, thorough and lengthy instructions were necessary to ensure that all students could participate. Another drawback, especially for the first assignment, was the difficulty of grading input that so heavily relies on students' artistic and creative talents, rather than merely their academic competence.

### 3. A Facebook Group for Students and Alumni

Social media has become a tool that can be used not only for social communication, but also for didactic purposes. Across the globe, educators are using social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, in order to engage with their students in a more comprehensive educational manner. These platforms enable instructors to increase the exposure that students receive by means of online content generation and to encourage collaboration and interaction outside of the classroom.<sup>14</sup> In order to complement the Old English courses at Leiden University, a Facebook group was created which has now run for over five

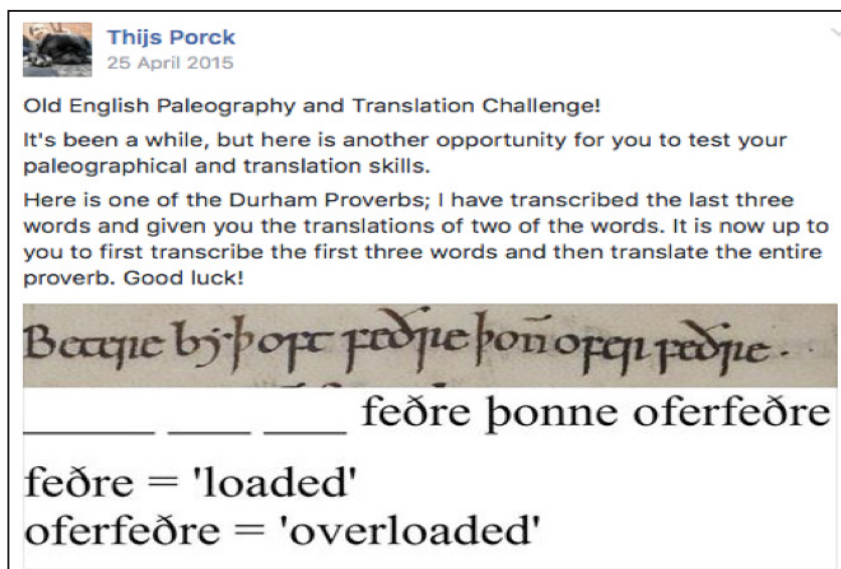


Figure 4: Example of an Old English translation challenge

years. This group has yielded a number of interesting didactic methods which can be utilized to increase engagement with former and current students and maintain users' interest in the subject matter.

feedback they gave their fellow students, thus ensuring that all students participated actively and contributed to the peer learning environment.

Both the vlogs and the proverbs were appreciated by the students. In evaluations of the assignments, they noted that they had enjoyed watching what other students had created; they appreciated the peer feedback; and, most of all, they also were thrilled with the challenge of a new type of assignment.<sup>13</sup> Naturally, such new assignments also come with downsides. For one, we had

<sup>13</sup> Based on 36 written evaluations; full results available upon request.

The Facebook group was created in June 2012 as a 'closed group', which means that only users who request permission are able to access the group. Due to the close ties to Leiden University, access was granted only

<sup>14</sup> For a full review of literature on using Facebook in education, see Ritesh Chugh and Umar Ruhi, 'Social Media in Higher Education: A Literature Review of Facebook', *Education and Information Technologies* (22 June 2017), 1–12, doi: 10.1007/s10639-017-9621-2

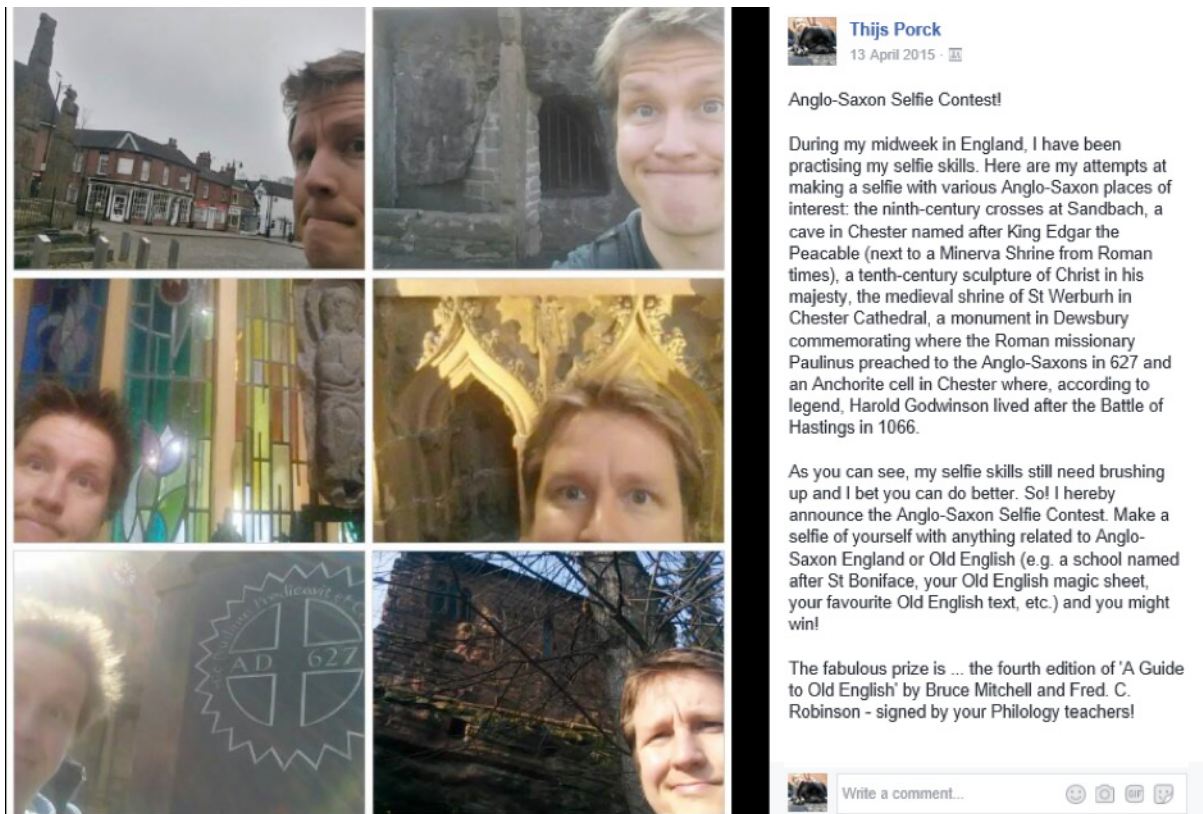


Figure 5: The most popular post to date: The Anglo-Saxon Selfie Contest

to former and current students of the Old English Philology courses offered in the BA and MA English Language and Culture degree programmes. This closed-door policy serves to keep the group fairly protected from the negative sides of online groups, including spammers, and reduces off-topic discussions, while maintaining a fairly good level of privacy to the group members.<sup>15</sup>

At the time of data analysis (August 2016), the group had run for four years, catered to 285 members and had amassed 1,620 posts, 13,255 likes and 4,088 comments. Compared to other online groups of its kind, the duration of this group is exceptional, since many public groups and a large number of closed groups generally do not last longer than 1.5 years.<sup>16</sup> In order to ascertain what the best

15 Chugh and Ruhi, p. 7; Adam Peruta and Alison B. Shields, 'Social Media in Higher Education: Understanding How Colleges and Universities Use Facebook', *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education*, 27 (2017), 132.

16 Zara T. Wilkinson, 'Should We Be Friends? The Question of Facebook in Academic Libraries', in *An Education in Facebook? Higher Education and the*

practices are for a group such as this, all posts, likes and comments were extracted using a token provided by the Facebook developers' tool and the Python programming language,<sup>17</sup> which resulted in the data being exported to Excel files for data cleanup and organization. From this data file, we were able to gather insightful data, including: most popular posts, most commented on posts, and lists of post-categories and their popularity based on number of likes. What follows is based on an analysis of this data and covers the period July 2012 to August 2016.

As it turned out, one of the strengths of the group is its use of thematic posting; according to the data, a number of recurring categories of posts garner more attention than other types of post. Some of the most popu-

*World's Largest Social Network*, ed. by Mike Kent and Tama Leaver (London: Routledge, 2014), p. 142.

17 For instructions on how to do this, see the manual provided at: <https://medium.com/towards-data-science/how-to-use-facebook-graph-api-and-extract-data-using-python-1839e19d6999> [last accessed 26 August 2017].

lar categories include:

- **Old English Translation Challenge.** A short Old English text is presented with a glossary and an image and students are encouraged to supply the best translation to Modern English. In some cases, students were also invited to try their hand at filling in missing words from a manuscript image (see Figure 4).
- **Anglo-Saxon Art.** Images of medieval artworks and/or archaeological finds from the Anglo-Saxon period are posted, accompanied by some contextual information. This information helps to place the classroom material in a broader context and also allows for a discussion of visual and material culture – topics that are rarely covered in the courses that focus on literature and language.
- **Links to Modern (Popular) Culture.** Memes, jokes and links to popular television series and films that have some connection to Anglo-Saxon England (e.g., History Channel's *Vikings* and BBC's *The Last Kingdom*) provide relevant and familiar material to students.
- **Anglo-Saxon Anecdotes.** Short historical oddities from Anglo-Saxon culture are presented in the form of stories taken from chronicles and saints' lives. These can be short messages or can link to larger articles or external blog posts that provide further information.
- **'Holiday Snaps'.** Personal photos of tutors on holiday or on an excursion to an Anglo-Saxon place of interest create an informal and comfortable space for students and encourages them to follow

suit.

- **Events and Activities.** The group provides an effective platform to inform students of upcoming events and activities, such as subject-related film nights, field trips and conferences that they can attend at the university. These notices increase exposure for the events, and the extracurricular activities motivate students to take a more active role in university life.

Based on our findings, we here present a list of best practices that provide a formula for a successful Facebook group of this kind:

- **Brevity.** Facebook is best suited for short posts; longer pieces of texts tend to be ignored or skipped over. It is generally advisable to present the information in one or two 'bite-size' paragraphs with a link to further information.
  - **Task-based posts,** such as translation challenges and quizzes, engage the students and encourage them to practice what they have learned in the classroom.
  - **Share your own passion.** When tutors demonstrate their own passion for the field, e.g., by posting pictures of themselves visiting Anglo-Saxon sites of interest, this encourages students to follow suit. One of the most popular posts on the Facebook group was the 'Anglo-Saxon Selfie Contest', which challenged students to take a selfie near an early medieval English place of interest, their favourite Old English text or anything else related to the field (see Figure 5). This contest continues to elicit new posts from current and former students.
- **Images, humour and interesting links** to other blogs also serve to stimulate interest in the subject and show users that the

By bringing certain elements of our teaching to the digital medium, we are communicating to our students in their own terms.

world of Anglo-Saxon studies is an active one.

- **Keep the group active.** By posting a minimum of two to three posts a week, you ensure that students keep coming back to the group.
- **Encourage student postings by engaging with them.** If a student posts a link of interest or a question, be sure to like and comment on their posts.

Naturally, the upkeep of an academic Facebook group like this is time consuming, but, as the following paragraphs will outline, the time and effort is rewarded in various ways.

For instructors, a Facebook group can supplement teaching both inside and outside the classroom. As noted above, the group can prove a useful outlet for instructors to provide supplementary material in those areas that the curriculum does not cover. Since posting in the Facebook group continues even during parts of the year without course offerings on Old English, the group helps students increase and retain some of their knowledge of the field and continues to stimulate their interest in the subject. This continued exposure to Anglo-Saxon material on the Facebook group may lead to an increase in enrollment figures for optional advanced Old English courses as well as the number of BA and MA theses written on Old English-related topics. Furthermore, the group can be used as a testing ground for tutors to gauge the relevance and appeal of potential curriculum topics.<sup>18</sup> Those items that elicit more attention online can then be taken into the classroom and incorporated into the lesson plan to increase the link between online and offline learning. Lastly, the group provides an available network for instructors to maintain contact with alumni and increase visibility for the subject outside the university, especially when these students have gone on to follow a career at a secondary school

18 Stefania Manca and Maria Ranieri, 'Facebook and the Others. Potentials and Obstacles of Social Media for Teaching in Higher Education', *Computers & Education*, 95 (2016), p. 217.

level.

It stands to reason that the Facebook group also profits the students. In order to get their opinion on the matter, we conducted a short survey among some of members of the group.<sup>19</sup> More than half of the respondents stated that they visited the page at least once a week and more than 65% reported regular engagement with the posts. They further wrote that the supplementary material and opportunities to practice translation skills were among the highlights of being members of the group. From other responses, we learned that students enjoy being part of a small online community where the emphasis is on content. From an academic perspective, the current students felt encouraged to find inspiration and motivation for thesis topics, while for alumni it allows for keeping up to date with the latest research in the field.

The advantages for instructor and student notwithstanding, two potential pitfalls of using Facebook groups for education must be noted. Research has shown that if instructors become too central to the interaction on the page, this can give the impression that the emphasis in the online community is also purely didactic.<sup>20</sup> One way for instructors to facilitate the comfort level of students is by interspersing educational posts with humour, appealing visual material and links to the present-day. If the focus is too explicitly educational, the comfort level of the students will decrease and they will be less likely to engage with the material. A related potential pitfall to interacting with students on social media is that there is a less pronounced academic style in the manner and method of instruction, which can result in a lowering of academic standards in the classroom if this is not managed carefully by instructors.<sup>21</sup>

In all, a Facebook group provides an effective and informal platform that allows instructors to introduce their students to a

19 Based on an online evaluation form, filled in by 28 students; full results available upon request.

20 Chugh and Ruhi, p. 6.

21 Ibid.

broader view of Anglo-Saxon culture and Old English literature. In order for a group to be successful, instructors need to maintain a constant presence in the group by posting at least two messages a week and maintain a good balance between the entertaining and the educational. Ideally, posts are brief, personal, informative and relevant to the subject matter of the group. If done well, a Facebook group is advantageous to both instructor and student.

### Conclusion

In this brief article, we have reported on three approaches to using new media to facilitate undergraduate teaching of Old English. We find it important to stress that these new teaching strategies were not intended to replace traditional modes of teaching. Instead, these digital modes of teaching were implemented to enhance traditional classroom teaching by providing additional opportunities for modes of learning that would otherwise disrupt face-to-face teaching. The

introduction of grammar videos, the move of peer-learning to a digital platform and the low-key interaction with students on social media ensured that in-class time could be used more effectively and allowed students to come to class better motivated and ready to learn.

By bringing certain elements of our teaching to the digital medium, we are communicating to our students in their own terms. In doing so, we follow an old technique that already surfaces in *Ælfric's Colloquy*. *Ælfric's* fictitious students tell their teacher, in the Old English gloss that was added later: *sprec us æfter uran gewunon* 'speak to us as we are used to' – speak to us in our own language. As we hope to have demonstrated, this Anglo-Saxon teaching tip still holds some merit.

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## Special Report on the Manuscript-Based Reading Group, University College Cork

**A**t the 2015 TOEBI AGM in Dublin, TOEBI PhD representative, Eleni Ponirakis, opened conference proceedings with her talk 'Encouraging Undergraduates to Learn Old English'. Ponirakis' presentation outlined the various ideas that the postgraduate student body had devised to enhance the study of medieval English literature at the University of Nottingham. The success of Nottingham's Old English postgraduate and undergraduate reading groups, in particular,

inspired the Cork comitatus, Alison Killilea, Niamh Kehoe and myself, to think of new ways to engage with Old English together as postgraduates as well as with our students.

Fortunately, there was already a successful Old English undergraduate reading group running in UCC, kindly hosted by our supervisor, Tom Birkett. Initially, the reading group had been held in classrooms close to campus and early in the evenings from around 5–6 pm to make it more ac-

cessible to undergraduate students. Attendance at the reading group was never compulsory, but it was mentioned in lectures and tutorials as a means for students to familiarise themselves with the language in a more relaxed setting. Similar to Nottingham's undergraduate group's attendance, the numbers of UCC's *bocgemot* featured regular appearances and casual visitors. We noticed that attendance at the reading group usually peaked whenever an exam was drawing closer. Still, there was always a sense of